Art of Our Time

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

Ulrich Museum of Art | Wichita State University
in association with the University of Washington Press
This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition
Art of Our Time: Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,
Wichita State University
April 24–August 8, 2010.

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the Ulrich Museum of Art.

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University of Washington Press
P.O. Box 50096
Seattle, WA 98195-5096
www.washington.edu/uwpress

Book design: Patrick Dooley, Lawrence, Kansas
Assistant manuscript editor: Susan C. Jones, Minneapolis
Photographers: Larry Schwarm and Jim Meyer for the Ulrich
Museum of Art, except work by Zhang Huan (courtesy of the
artist)
Printing and binding: Greystone Graphics, Kansas City, Kansas
This book was typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro, designed by
Robert Slimbach (based on the roman typefaces of Claude
Garamond and italic typefaces of Robert Granjon), and Gill Sans,
designed by Eric Gill.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art.
Art of our time: selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,
Wichita State University / Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey;
with Toby Kamps . . . [et al.]; photographic essay by Larry
Schwarm. – 1st ed.
   p. cm.
   Published on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Ulrich
Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Apr. 24–Aug. 8, 2010.
   4. Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art – Exhibitions. I. McDonnell, Pat-
   ricia, 1956 – II. Stamey, Emily III. Kamps, Toby IV. Schwarm, Larry,
   1944– V. Title. Selections from the Ulrich
Museum of Art, Wichita State University.
N6490.E36 2010
709.04'007478186 – dc22
2009051477

Front cover: Joan Miró, Personnages Oiseaux (Bird People), 1977–78
(cat. no. 16)
Back cover: Tom Otterness, Millipede, 2008 (cat. no. 45)

This exhibition and book have been made possible through the
generous support of Emprise Bank and the National Endowment
for the Arts. Additional sponsors include the Joan S. Beren
Foundation, Edward and Helen Healy, Harry Pollak, and
Richard S. Smith and Sondra M. Langel. Support has also been
provided by Jon and Kelly Callen, Mike and Dee Michaelis, Jayne
S. Milburn, Christine F. Paulsen-Polk, and the Wichita State
University Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic
Affairs and Research.

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Charles Grafly was among America’s most sought-after public sculptors of the early twentieth century, a time that saw a surge in the popularity of Civil War memorial monuments and sculptural adornments to building exteriors. A native of Pennsylvania, he was trained in the classical tradition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia (where he studied under Thomas Eakins) and later was schooled at the Académie Julian and Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. From 1892 until his death, he taught at the Pennsylvania Academy. Grafly’s most notable projects included the sculptural program for the U.S. Customs House in New York (1907) and the memorial to the Union Army general George Meade in Washington, D.C. (1927).

In 1971 Grafly’s daughter, Dorothy, and her husband, Charles H. Drummond, donated the contents of the artist’s studio, which included paintings, plaster casts, cast bronzes, drawings, and tools, to Wichita State University along with funds to establish an endowment for collection care. Today, the artist’s personal papers, which the Drummonds also donated at that time, are maintained in Special Collections and University Archives in the Ablah Library. The Ulrich Museum, meanwhile, is responsible for more than six hundred works, including the original plaster casts for many of his sculptures. In 2005 the Ulrich opened the Grafly Garden – featuring six of his sculptures and a stately colonnade, interspersed with foliage – adjacent to the museum and the McKnight Art Center.

The artist made Pioneer Mother as part of his commission to produce a large-scale bronze sculpture for the Palace of Fine Arts at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. The exposition not only celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal but also showcased San Francisco’s rapid recovery from the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and fire. The fairgrounds arose on 635 acres of landfill located in what is now the city’s Marina district. The only building not razed after the fair was the Palace of Fine Arts; it was completely rebuilt in the 1960s. In 1999 the organization San Francisco Beautiful recognized Grafly’s sculpture, which had been moved to Golden Gate Park, with its Beautification Award for contributing to the city’s aesthetic appeal.

Grafly’s bronze was intended as “an enduring memorial to those brave, loyal, and self-sacrificing women who made the American civilization of the State of California possible.” The Pioneer Mother Monument Association awarded him the project after considering nine of the nation’s leading sculptors, Daniel Chester French and Frederick MacMonnies among them. Grafly submitted several designs to the association, which chose one that differs from the Ulrich piece. Even though the proposed version represented here was not selected, Grafly himself liked it enough to cast it in bronze. The woman’s erect, confident stance recalls the noble graces of Greek antiquity as much as it does courageous frontierswomen. Sculptures embodying the classical Greek muse typically hold a writing tablet, a globe, or a lyre, but this stalwart figure symmetrically balances two infants aloft. True to a popular early-twentieth-century mode, Grafly employed the artistic language of the Beaux-Arts school to render this mother of the pioneer West.

Patricia McDonnell


The Ulrich’s collection includes more than six hundred works by Grafly.
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.


Advisory Board and Staff

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwartn is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwartn, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.
